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Addressing weight stigma; a timely and warranted call

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The Lancet Public Health editorial¹ that highlights the need to address weight stigma is both timely and warranted.

As empirical evidence has demonstrated, akin to other health conditions, obesity is a complex and shares the same determinants. However, framing and representations of obesity are simplistic, with an emphasis on blaming individuals and a consistent message that obesity is solely caused by and can easily and rapidly be reduced by moving more and eating less. This rhetoric alongside the pervasive stereotypes and misconceptions of obesity - evident in obesity policy, campaigns, media and education - has and continues to play an important role in the pervasiveness of weight stigma and discrimination that has been reported across the world.

The impact of weight stigma and discrimination on health is not new, and neither is the evidence to demonstrate its pervasiveness across settings. What is needed is concerted efforts to reduce and ultimately end weight stigma and discrimination. This is not a simple of easy task – stigmatising attitudes and beliefs have been formed and are maintained through consistent exposure to demeaning and derogatory content that belittles people with obesity and is ill-aligned with extant research evidence. Critical to addressing weight stigma, is the need to improve education, rethink current practices and work collaboratively – isolated actions are unlikely to make a difference. At all levels, change is needed – from the Government in societal messages and policy; media portrayal that is often inaccurate and cherry picks information about obesity and associated treatment; education that is first limited, and second, provides inadequate learning to reflect the complexity of obesity; and in healthcare through equitable, supporting practices.

An important element of the aforementioned editorial¹ is that “patients with obesity should be treated with the same consideration and compassion that is extended to other diseases” – this is vital given the impacts of experiencing weight stigma and discrimination in healthcare including avoidance of future healthcare and maladaptive health behaviours. There are three core principles of the UK National Health Service, one of which is “that it meets the need of everyone”.² Thus, healthcare environments should represent a safe space that is free of judgement, stigma and discrimination, where patients, no matter their reason for attending, feel able to access healthcare, receive support and care where relevant, and speak openly with a ‘trusted’ practitioner – surely that’s what we all want?

References

1. The LP. Addressing weight stigma. The Lancet. Public health. 2019 Apr;4(4):e168.
2. National Health Service. Principles and values that guide the NHS. <https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/about-the-nhs/principles-and-values/> [Last accessed 17th April 2019].